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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses aspects of faculty, administration, departmental structure, curriculum, and production operations of community college theatre departments in general and of Illinois Central College in particular. It contends that the common and revered tenet of community college institutional philosophy is "community service." The importance of this objective governs the pursuits of all departments, pervades course content and methodology, and brings about an unusual appreciation for interdependence among teaching disciplines. There are very few community college theatre departments with a theatre facility entirely to themsleves, and unlike most departments in senior institutions, the theatre staff is usually shared with speech and English departments. The paper concludes that the demands of the community and of community college students do stimulate invention on the part of community college teachers. (TS)

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"THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE THEATRE DEPARTMENT: AN ADMINISTRATIVE POINT OF REFERENCE"

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I write this paper with three assumptions directing its content and scope. First, that the readers are more than likely administrators in four year colleges and universities. Second, that what was once thought to be unique conditions and qualities of community colleges are increasingly less singular when compared with like aspects of senior institutions. Third, that the very act of attempting to generalize administrative matters for community college theatre administrators will at best be judged unreliable and at worse fruitless. Consequently, the things I have to say about faculty, administration, departmental structure, curricular and production operations of community college theatre departments in general and of Illinois Central College in particular may not be overly profound. I will, however, try to focus on matters frequently viewed as peculiar to community colleges.

Administrative Organizational Structure

Most community colleges structure their teaching disciplines within broad "divisional" categories. Theatre "Departments" may be found in the Communication Division, Language Arts Division, Humanities Division, Fine Arts Division, Speech Arts Division, Man and Society Division; or, at Illinois Central College, the Creative Arts Division. It all seems to be a silly exercise in symbol manipulation but the strength of economic persuasion makes the policy all too sensible for chief administrators of the college. Somehow, they think that the broad divisional organization quite naturally cancels any need for departmental administration (in fact, the very use of the word "department" is frowned upon). In this way, a number of administrative salaries are saved and only a handful of select people are involved with policy making decisions.

At Illinois Central College, the Theatre Department shares its division leader and administrator with Departments of Speech, Commercial Art, Graphics, Vocal and Instrumental Music, Art and Dance. However jagged the organizational lineation may be, the several disciplines are declared an aesthetic union and grouped within the Creative Arts Division. The Division Chairman is responsible to the Dean of Instruction and President of the College for all curricular, budgetary and production programming---everything. It is apparent to rational people that should a renaissance person be found, he or she would not possess the energy or find the time of day to perform all administrative duties for seven departments. The Division Chairman recognizes the need for departmental administrative expertise and quickly delegates such responsibility to members of each department sans title, teaching load reduction or money. If the faculty refuses, then facility planning, course programming, faculty assignments, budgetary allotments, production schedules, etc., could be determined by a choir director or a commercial artist acting as Assistant Division Chairman. So we do it. We do it for the sake of our students, our sanity and self-preservation.

The organizational system discussed above is similiar to the College-Dean-Departments structure of most universities. In this enviornment the Dean and the academic community rewards departmental leadership and administrative expertise with load reduction or money or both. And there seems to lie the rub---"academic community." In this regard, most community college faculties are striving to bring that dimension into the fabric of the community college system; few have succeeded. In most community colleges, departmental faculties have

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have little, if anything, to say about college, division and even department policy. It is rare when a department's faculty chooses its Division Chairman. The community college faculty member is considered a thinking entity only within the confines of a classroom.

The Law of Community Service

The common and revered tenet of community college institutional philosophy is that of "community service." It is paramount in deciding curricular and co-curricular programming within baccalaureate or occupational divisions. It governs the pursuits of all departments; it pervades course content and methodology. The importance of this objective has brought about an unusual appreciation for and interdependence among teaching disciplines. A spirit of cooperation and respect is especially formed between occupational and academic programs and faculties. Theatre departments have benefited greatly with the emergence of relative course modifications and exciting activities.

At Illinois Central College, for example, the Theatre Department has contributed significantly to special community projects of the Social Science Division, Agriculture Division, Health Occupations Division and the Learning Resource Center.

The nursing faculty came to the Theatre Department for assistance in training graduate as well as trainee nurses in critical thinking and interpersonal skills needed for general hospital care. Theatre Department staff helped write the given circumstances for multiple scenes in which the patients, played by theatre majors, reacted to nursing care in several ways. The patient's behavioral response would be that of (1) denial of handicap, (2) belligerance, (3) withdrawal, (4) amorous or (5) cooperative. The staging of the scenes was directed by theatre personnel in the theatre facility. The acting students found the experience extremely rewarding as their concentration on the character's action, objective and obstacle was strengthened.

In a similiar manner, we helped the Social Science Division's program in police training. Community law enforcement agencies requested assistance in family crisis intervention training for their officers. Scripts were written or rewritten in which a violent husband-wife fight or father-son scrap would take place. At the height of the crises, two police officers in full uniform and unaware of the nature of the problem would appear at the door. They would enter and attempt to take control of the situation, as the scene continued extemporaneously. Techniques and strategems learned in the classroom were applied as the police worked to resolve the conflict. As before, the student actors sharpened their tools of concentration, imagination, and observation. Both the police and nursing scenes were video-taped for review and critical comment the following day.

Through professional and personal associations, our work with the nurses and police was discovered by faculty members of the College of Communications at Michigan State University. They were working on a specially funded project testing the effects of video-taped testimony on information retention and decision making in jury trials. Actual trials of a previous day and previous place were staged before unspecting members of a jury. Following the

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staged trials, the jurors were told by the real judge that what they had witnessed was a staged re-play and that their cooperation was vital to important research being conducted. They were then tested. Members of Illinois Central College's Theatre Department directed and acted in one of the trial scenes and served as consultants for others.

Again, a call from the community came, this time to the Learning Resource Center of the college and in turn to the Theatre Department. The Illinois Valley Library System, an association of 32 rural community libraries, wanted help in publicizing as well as energizing their summer reading programs for children. We responded with a touring storybook theatre production complete with music and dance. In addition, a number of the rural community libraries were selected as children's creative drama centers. Students of the Theatre Department's summer program visited these centers daily for three weeks and worked with the children in the staging of their own stories.

Illinois Central College serves the Greater Peoria Metropolitan Area populated by more than 320,000 urban dwellers. Yet, a sizeable portion of our community college "community" is rural. Recognizing this fact and the contemporary trend of taking the theatre to the people, the Theatre Department created its counterpart version of "Street Theatre" and understandably labeled it "Field Theatre." Operating on the splintered floor of a flat-bed truck borrowed from local industry, we took original musical versions of Feiffer's People and Story Theatre to the fields, lawns and town squares of the country side. The Field Theatre offering is now a permanent part of our summer program.

As an outgrowth of this latter activity, the Agriculture Division has requested specially designed eight week courses in theatre appreciation for students enrolled in their programs. We honored the request as well as the one from our Black Community Center for a black theatre history course and the one from our community theatre players for evening acting/directing classes.

Yes, in the community college, the community is king. Long live the King! I think that four year colleges and universities have learned from us about the importance of community service. They have forsaken their lofty and sometimes absurd branches of the academia tree and discovered that thrilling things can be done with "outsiders" who in turn become "insiders" who in turn occupy theatre seats. And if occupying theatre seats isn't the essence of our work, then we shouldn't work.

The Theatre Faculty & Facility

Perhaps the most incessant headache for the departmental administrator of any educational institution is that of the faculty. Many of the problems are commonly held by departments of senior and junior levels. Most department leaders stagger the administrative tightrope secured at opposite ends by democracy and dictatorship. Departmental policy decision must include faculty imput. The form and amount of that imput seems to be always at question. Last year I interviewed for the chairmanship at two institutions. At one, the chairperson was being dismissed for "failure to significantly involve the faculty in the establishment of departmental philosophy and planning." At the other, the exiting chairperson was criticised for "not being able to take charge and make decisions." At any level of instruction the theatre chairperson is confronted with and must resolve faculty requests for load reductions, travel funds, course re-assignments, production assignments, production re-scheduling and, of course, advancement.

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Faculty problems unique to the community college theatre department vary in nature and degree with the institution. Some, nevertheless, hold common concern for the administrators. Unlike most departments in senior institutions, theatre staff must be shared with speech and English departments. More than likely, the bulk of the teaching load will fall in the other department. Your plea to higher echelon administrators for the appointment of a trained theatre technician has been favored. You can offer the applicant a more than competitive salary but half of his 12 to 15 hour classroom assignment will require the teaching of speech or English fundamentals. With this set of given circumstances it is difficult to attract qualified applicants ---and once attracted, it is even more difficult to retain the apointee. He receives a poor evaluation from the chairman of the other department and is refused tenure; or, another position is sought and found where the technician can apply his training and talent on a full time basis. It is a serious and agonizing problem.

I have always argued (in vain) that the term "released time" is a misnomer. I am convinced that most community college chief administrators have visions of faculty feet propped atop desks while the owners are gulping coffee and reading Playboy or Ms. Yet "released time" is what they grudgingly and all too infrequently offer. Senior institutions are more realistic in acknowledging time and effort extended by faculty in extra and co-curricular activities. The teaching load is significantly less in four year schools; yet, as a rule, they grant additional load reductions for production assignments. When the community college theatre faculty member rightfully seeks a "release" from some class responsibility for production duties, he understandably is perplexed when it is not granted. It is a long process to establish the understanding needed to produce three hour load reductions for the director and designer of a major production. It takes hard persuasion, perseverance, a Division Chairman to fight for you and some professional cracker-barrel maneuvering---but, it can be done.

There are a few community college theatre departments with a theatre facility all to themselves; there are more that share a facility with other departments and divisions; and, there are even more that have nothing to share. I have personally experienced the latter two conditions and have been promised a completion of the cycle before retirement.

In art, when you have nothing you want to achieve artistically more and strive harder to get it---and, you usually succeed. I read that somewhere, but it is so. In the first years of our existance at Illinois Central College we had no theatre facility and the happiest faculty. We also had some of the most creative productions in our nine year history. We searched out theatre facilities with Peter Brook's "empty space" maxim as our inspiration. We did find empty spaces but we also found theatre facilities in institutions for the mentally insane, barns, fraternal organizations, churches and parks. We worked in them all.

Illinois Central College now has a theatre facility. Its use is in constant demand by companion departments of music and speech as well as out-of-house divisions. The theatre faculty see it as a theatre where theatre should take place as often as possible. Others see it as a lecture hall, a conference headquaters, a recital hall, a student services/lounge area, a community service center---and so it goes. The bitter consequence for the theatre department is a limited season of

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two major productions for the year and one week of locked-door rehearsal for each show. A limited season equals limited faculty production assignments equals an unhappy faculty.

The academic enviornment of four year schools not only values but strongly encourages (1) faculty involvement with professional associations and (2) publication. They are immediate when promotion or advancement is being considered. Graduate students matriculate to teaching positions in community colleges eager to contribute to their field and impress administrators as well. So, they commit themselves to research and association work in addition to the college responsibilities. Eventually they submit a rationale for promotion or advancement to the division chairperson that includes the fruits of research and professional committee work as reasons for a favorable response. Well, in most community colleges, the inclusions are a waste of time . Publications and professional activity are tolerated but viewed as time spent away from classroom preparation or grading papers. It is difficult to convince cheif administrators that traditional research can and should be conducted in a community college. They believe it to be somehow injurious to the student; not the results of the research but the execution of the research. The teacher is told that, after all, he or she was hired to teach and that research belongs in the domain of universities. There is even a reluctance to hire people with Ph.D.'s. There is suspect that the Ph. D. is a research scholar's degree and it would naturally follow that the holder would be disinterested if not incapable of teaching. No objection is voiced to innovative programs that serve the community . This quality is encouraged and given consideration when advancement or promotion awards are made. Still, the community college teacher's level of professional excellence is normally determined on the impression (and at times "whim") of the division chairperson.

Conclusion

Working at a community college is at once exciting and frustrating. I suppose that could be said for working at the university level as well. But at a community college it seems that things get accomplished in spite of rather than because of "administration."

It should be understood that what I have not specifically cited as an Illinois Central College reference, represents my personal observation of community colleges in general. We have, after some resistance over the years, eliminated most of the problems. As I look back at what I have said in this paper, I regret that the general tone of it smacks of despair and negativism. The demands from the community and the multiple faced profile of the community college student prohibits boredom and stimulates invention. And if you can produce awe as you invent, as well as set your table, what else is there?